ARTICLES

Opinions of Scholars and Human Rights Advocates About Alexander Dvorkin

50 Comments on Alexander Dvorkin

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"But what if the founder of a religious organization is mentally ill? What if he is a maniac and a murderer? What if he is pathologically ambitious and greedy? And what if the first generation after him becomes a criminal enterprise? What if, within ten years after the guru's death, more than half of those he personally declared his official successors end up in prison for criminal offenses? What if the self-proclaimed prophet and great reformer of Christianity is a sex maniac and a child molester? What kind of organizations would be created by such people?" — "Sectology. Totalitarian Sects" by A. Dvorkin

If you type the name Alexander Dvorkin into the Google search bar, the engine will likely return dozens of web pages featuring interviews, work papers, and official commentaries. You'll be met with the image of a well-known expert, an indefatigable workaholic and apologist, an ardent fighter for the purity of faith. Overall, the content paints a positive portrait of a very driven and active individual.

But could it be that you are falling under a deep illusion as you form your opinion of him? After all, Dvorkin is all around nowadays! He is a public star. He's a recognized researcher. So how is it, the reader may ask, that you publish so much exposé

material on him — could it really be that no one else saw the dark genius behind the man?

In fact, his rotten core was seen much earlier and far more clearly long before us. Dvorkin has been written about, shouted about, and exposed. And yet, today, in the search engine, you'll no longer find the voices of those who once resisted the destruction of democratic institutions in Russia and fought to defend constitutional rights and freedom of religion. Even then, these people were criticizing the "chief fighter against cults and sects" and warning that appointing Dvorkin as head of the Expert Council on State Religious Evaluation at the Ministry of Justice could usher in a new dark historical chapter full of absurdity and tragedy in the state, where an inquisition could revive with harsh repression, bans, and ideological dictatorship under the guise of "defending traditional values." A signal of the active phase in the construction of a Fourth Reich in Russia — one that revives Nazism.

As we gathered material for this article, mainly from the web archive since open-access criticism of Alexander Dvorkin has all but vanished, we noted just how accurate and farsighted the perspectives of these scholars and human rights advocates were, and how wise these people proved to be. Even back in 2009, they foresaw a major human tragedy.

Unfortunately, just as they warned, it came to pass! But they weren't heard back then. So today, we aim to bring more objectivity to our investigation and amplify the voices of those who tried to alert Russian society to the looming threat, and whose voice proved too faint against the onslaught of the anticult plague.

Conflict Between the Academic Community and Dvorkin's Totalitarian Sect

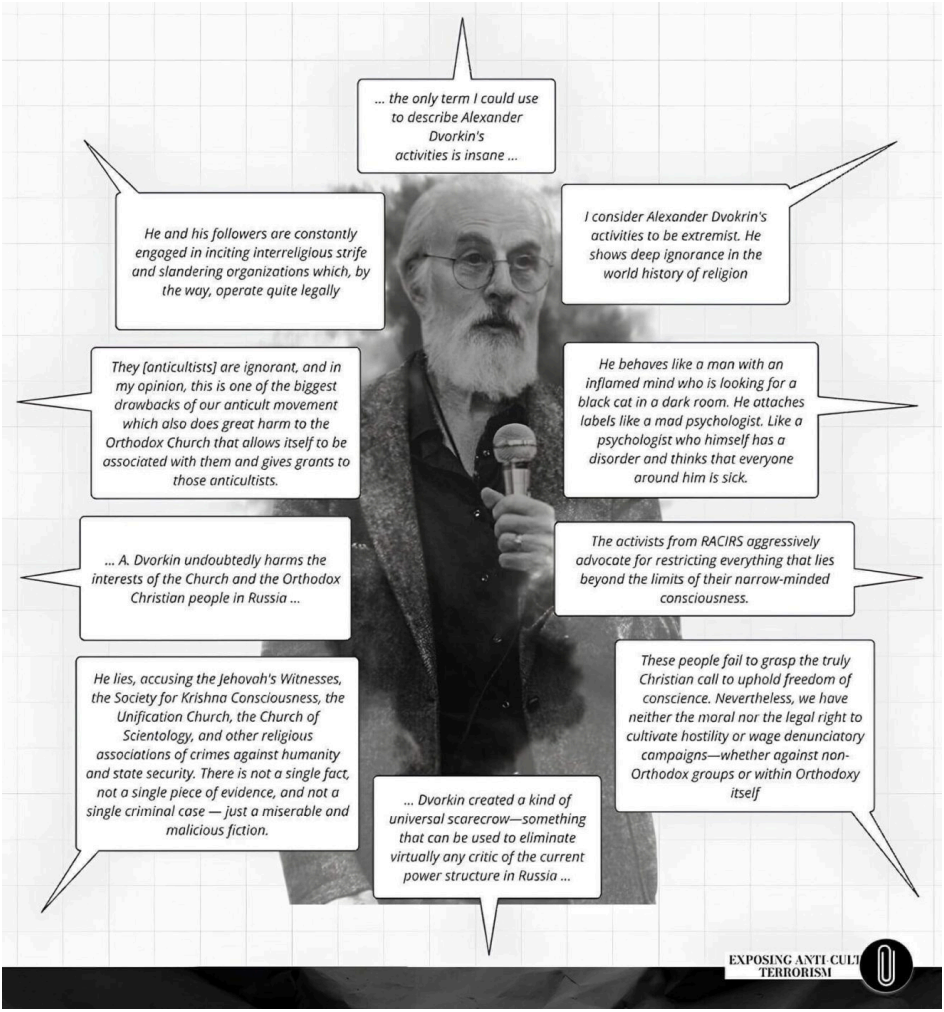
First and foremost, it must be said that Russian academic religious scholars and human rights advocates have consistently maintained a clearly critical position toward Alexander Dvorkin. Scholars pointed out Dvorkin's lack of objectivity and competence, as well as the overtly biased nature of his approach to the study of religious groups. They argued that Dvorkin deliberately simplified complex matters of religious diversity, reducing everything to the label of "totalitarian sect." Critics noted that he used this term to discredit a broad range of religious organizations without regard for their actual nature or activities and to stigmatize anyone who fell outside his religious understanding of Russian Orthodox Christianity.

The main sources of conflict included the following:

- Many scholars believed that Dvorkin's analysis was often based on subjective judgments, personal convictions, or outright fantasies rather than on strict academic criteria;
- His substitution of genuine scholarly analysis with extremist anticult ideology;
- Dvorkin's persistent division of faiths into "legitimate religions" and "dangerous sects," which was seen as an attempt to manipulate public consciousness. This especially outraged the academic community;
- His interpretation of concepts such as "heresy" and "sect" deviated from generally accepted theological standpoints, sparking disputes not only among religious scholars but also among church representatives;
- He created an atmosphere of fear and intolerance in society;
- He used pseudo-academic methods to justify repression;
- He collaborated with government authorities and law enforcement agencies in suppressing religious freedoms.

Religious scholars and human rights advocates tried to speak out about this and to warn about the dangers of Dvorkin's ideas and their potential consequences. But the problem was that they lacked prominent platforms and means to speak loudly. Their outcry sounded more like a whisper, while Dvorkin was given a "green light" by someone and had "every door opened" for him. He traveled relentlessly across the regions, brainwashing everyone he met, from heads of regional and local administrations to law enforcement and ordinary

monks. He gave lectures, authored publications in online outlets, and appeared in numerous interviews and talk shows.


... the only term I could use to describe Alexander Dvorkin's activities is insane ...
He and his followers are constantly engaged in inciting interreligious strife and slandering organizations which, by the way, operate quite legally
I consider Alexander Dvokrin's activities to be extremist. He shows deep ignorance in the world history of religion
They [anticultists] are ignorant, and in my opinion, this is one of the biggest drawbacks of our anticult movement which also does great harm to the Orthodox Church that allows itself to be associated with them and gives grants to those anticultists.
He behaves like a man with an inflamed mind who is looking for a black cat in a dark room. He attaches labels like a mad psychologist. Like a psychologist who himself has a disorder and thinks that everyone around him is sick.
... A. Dvorkin undoubtedly harms the interests of the Church and the Orthodox Christian people in Russia ...
The activists from RACIRS aggressively advocate for restricting everything that lies beyond the limits of their narrow-minded consciousness.
He lies, accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and other religious associations of crimes against humanity and state security. There is not a single fact, not a single piece of evidence, and not a single criminal case — just a miserable and malicious fiction.
These people fail to grasp the truly Christian call to uphold freedom of conscience. Nevertheless, we have neither the moral nor the legal right to cultivate hostility or wage denunciatory campaigns—whether against non-Orthodox groups or within Orthodoxy itself
... Dvorkin created a kind of universal scarecrow—something that can be used to eliminate virtually any critic of the current power structure in Russia ...
EXPOSING ANTI CULT TERRORISM

“Dvorkin has left a scorched earth behind him.”

Massimo Introvigne, sociologist of religion and an attorney, Italy:

“I would say he is not taken seriously internationally. When he tried to come to some academic conferences, he was more or less ridiculed. Because of his reconstructions of groups like Hare Krishnas or Jehovah’s Witnesses are so far away from the academic side that he was not taken seriously and he stopped coming to academic conferences. But in Russia, for some reason, I see he is taken seriously by parts of the Orthodox Church. And this is very strange to me because some of his theories are really extreme.”[1]

Patricia Duval, attorney from France:

“ In particular, Dvorkin and the Lyons Center, he attacks, for example Falun Gun. You know, Falun Gun is just a very peaceful spiritual movement practicing certain exercises, meditation, you know, all of that. They are currently being attacked and portrayed as if they are terrorists or agents of the CIA. Well, I think he has a problem… He helps or helped the Chinese government in repression, a real bad repression of this group [Falun Dafa]. And this repression got [to extremes],

to cases of torture, you know, it's really bad. And institutionalizing them and so on." [2]

Joseph Grieboski, founder and president of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy:

"Honestly, I think the only term I could use to describe Alexander Dvorkin's activities is insane… Dvorkin has no educational background, no expertise, no basis for his rants. They're simply the ramblings of an angry, insane man." [3]

Jonathan Mahoney, professor of philosophy:

"My way of thinking about the role of a figure like Dvorkin is it's problematic because you have an individual who has all these connections to government organizations and dominant religious institutions, in this case, the Russian Orthodox Church, who is using his role as a member of FECRIS to – I would put it this way – spread propaganda about religious minorities that pose almost no threat whatsoever to the political order. And so that's very problematic because on the one hand he represents the majority of religious culture, which is being supported through FECRIS and on the other hand he is promoting exaggerated fears about religious minorities that are no real threat whatsoever. And this is a problem." [4]

Regis Dericquebourg, sociologist, professor, France:

"[Dvorkin] has been extremely active in the fight against non-Orthodox religious movements in the Russian media, through his books, his conferences and his DVDs, in particular the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, Falun Gong, Hare Krishna, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and others. He enjoys the support of the Russian Minister of Justice, Alexander Konovalov, who was once his student at the Orthodox St Tikhon University, and conveys his hate speech through the Orthodox churches of the former Soviet Union…" [5]

Nikolai Shaburov, religious scholar, culture expert:

"I don't know a single serious expert or religious scholar who would have a positive attitude towards Dvorkin, his activities, his texts, his statements, and the forms of polemics he conducts… He and his followers are constantly engaged in inciting interreligious strife and slandering organizations which, by the way, operate quite legally." [6]

Mikhail Sitnikov, Russian public figure, publicist, journalist, and human rights advocate:

"In order not to drown in the multitude of facts indicating the absurdity of such an 'expert body,' suffice it to recall that its chairman is Alexander Dvorkin who calls himself a 'professor of sectology,' a US citizen who fled from there to Russia due to a

high-profile criminal case against the anticult organization CAN whose activities were recognized as criminal." [7]

Donald Baker, professor of Asian studies at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada):

"I consider Alexander Dvokrin's activities to be extremist. He shows deep ignorance in the world history of religion. He moves away from objectivity and facts and creates his own version of events. It's very dangerous. I wouldn't consider him a reliable source of information regarding religious movements."[8]

William Schmidt, religious scholar, philosopher, and historian of religion:

"He [Dvorkin] now looks like an unbalanced, ignorant person who has encapsulated himself. But at the same time, I'll say he's a well-educated man with a wealth of life experience, but a man who presently ended up with a very narrow horizon within society, and therefore he turns out to be dangerous in society, because he attributes to phenomena what isn't there… Today, Dvorkin is stirring up interreligious discord as he has forgotten how to learn. He behaves like a man with an inflamed mind who is looking for a black cat in a dark room. He attaches labels like a mad psychologist. Like a psychologist who himself

has a disorder and thinks that everyone around him is sick. That's the behavior of a boy in short pants who should have joined the next group a long time ago, but is stuck at the nursery level, still playing with his old toys in a far different sandbox than our society and religious sphere represent today. I understand why it's so hard and psychologically uncomfortable for him, and why his consciousness cannot cope with his inner processes. Yet, he somehow expresses himself, and that expression turns out to be personally destructive. I mean, he is now destroying himself… Charlatans cannot be on expert commissions. A person with an unstable mind who is hysterical and says insane things cannot speak on behalf of the expert community even if it's politically beneficial to someone. Due to such political benefits, the resilience and stability of society as a whole may eventually be lost… Dvorkin has left a scorched earth behind him." [9]

Boris Falikov, religious scholar, author of a review of the book "Sectology. Totalitarian Sects" by A. Dvorkin:

"On almost seven hundred pages of the small text, a simple juxtaposition runs from chapter to chapter: 'sectarian' or 'cultic' leaders are terrible criminals against humanity, akin to those who were convicted at the Nuremberg trials, while ordinary 'sectarians' are mute victims… Let's imagine ourselves for a moment in the shoes of those victims. Suppose you

became fond of the teachings of reverend Sun Myung Moon, his followers pour a sea of kind feelings onto you, you feel like you belong among them, and the feeling of fellowship helps you overcome the difficulties of life. Then a Dvorkin's missionary comes up to you and says: 'Don't believe those liars, they're tricking you. They call it "love bombing"'. Whatever it is called, it makes it easier to live." (B. Falikov. "Anatomy of Myth" // NG-Religions, April 11, 2001). [10]

"...I'd like to highlight that such complete ignorance of those sect fighters, anticultists in religious studies plays an extremely harmful role because they actually steer our law enforcement agencies against certain religious minorities, without really understanding what those religious movements are. They [anticultists] are ignorant, and in my opinion, this is one of the biggest drawbacks of our anticult movement which also does great harm to the Orthodox Church that allows itself to be associated with them and gives grants to those anticultists. This discredits the state which supports these movements through its law enforcement agencies." [11]

Alexander Nezhny, publicist, author of "Sectology Lessons":

"His [Dvorkin's] work that is familiar to us not from hagiography but in real life, causes a shock of amazement. Indeed, he's like Vesuvius, Mauna Loa, and Klyuchevskaya

Sopka jointly spewing fiery lava from their depths in dozens of articles, interviews, reports, and books.

He was nearly the first in our Fatherland to speak about the vile custom of sectarians to appropriate people's possessions. He was the first to accuse them of rape. He was the first to expose their infernal thirst for murder. And finally, he was the first to penetrate into the secrets of all those Witnesses, Krishnas, Munists, and Mormons — into their chilling plot of a coup d'etat to seize authority in Russia. Stone upon stone, brick upon brick, a plan for destroying holy Russia, premeditated to the smallest detail by secret sectarian and cultic centers, is being built. If it weren't for Dvorkin, we'd be like blind puppies. We saw the light thanks to his works…

Meanwhile, there is not a single word of truth in everything that he and his allies say everywhere around. He lies, putting on a crown of thorns of a political exile. He's not Father Pecherin, Herzen, or Galich — after declaring himself a Jew, he left the USSR for Israel. I really don't care what kind of blood flows in his veins, whether he's a Tatar, a Persian, or an Eskimo, and how he left the world's number-one country of workers and peasants: crawling on his belly across the border, diving into the cold Baltic Sea in a diving suit, or getting an Israeli visa after standing in a long queue, drinking goodbye to his friends, kissing his girlfriend, and flying away — I really don't give a

damn about that either. If he's Jew, that's okay. He fled to Israel — fine. But lying is wrong…

He lies when claiming that our 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience is a copy of an American law — just because there simply isn't such a law in the United States. He lies, informing the shocked society about two hundred and fifty thousand families destroyed by cultists. I called an employee of the Russian Prosecutor's Office who allegedly had such information. He referred me to Professor N.A. Trofimchuk, head of the Department for Religious Studies at the Academy of Public Administration. The professor replied that such statistics don't exist and Dvorkin lies.

He lies, accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and other religious associations of crimes against humanity and state security. There is not a single fact, not a single piece of evidence, and not a single criminal case — just a miserable and malicious fiction.

The education Dvorkin received and the magnificent bouquet of degrees and titles he brought from overseas were insufficient to teach at the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow State University: Yasen Nikolaevich Zasursky refused to extend contract with him. But the "professor," "doctor," "candidate",

and “bachelor” probably knows who was and remains the father of all lies. And he must remember the terrible warning of the wise king: “Whoever pours out lies will perish” (Proverbs 19:9). [12]

Sergey Shatokhin, philosopher, jurist, geopolitician, and environmentalist:

“…an object invented by A.L. Dvorkin with blurred boundaries, which he uses to replace the traditional understanding of religious sectarianism in the Church, is really impossible to classify. As not only a ‘theologian’ but also a ‘philosopher,’ he should know that a lack of logic in conclusions indicates the falsity of initial assumptions. As a result, we have a ‘pseudopod’.” [13]

“A. Dvorkin and a number of people who speak along with him on these issues (meaning A. Kuraev – **author’s note**) demonstrate their lack of understanding of the processes of church canonization and glorification of Saints as phenomena of the Church’s inner life… Their belief that it is possible to ban something outright in this area or to entirely prevent certain events, in our view, simply reflects their lack of sufficient faith in God. It shows that they attribute to themselves — through their own understanding and reasoning — abilities and qualities that, in the Christian Church, are considered to

belong not to people, no matter how educated or high-ranking they may be in the church hierarchy, but solely to God." [14]

Igor Kolchenko, Russian religious scholar, candidate of historical sciences, co-author of "Essays on Russian Sectology," 2005:

"As a teacher at educational institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church, giving lectures to future Orthodox pastors, theologians and scholars, A. Dvorkin undoubtedly harms the interests of the Church and the Orthodox Christian people in Russia, as he teaches students to disregard scientific methods of work, to have superficial acquaintance with the subject of religious sectarianism, and does not form a canonical church view on the subject. Unable (or unwilling) to work in a chosen field professionally from a scientific point of view, i.e. in the way that the very subject of research — modern religious sectarianism — requires, through his manuals, A.L. Dvorkin prepares self–confident amateurs for the Church who will not only fail to defend the Church's interests in modern civil society, but will also discredit church science in the face of secular researchers and the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church in the face of society and the state."

A. Ratnikov, Roerich Society "Orion" in Yaroslavl:

“The activists from RACIRS aggressively advocate for restricting everything that lies beyond the limits of their narrow-minded consciousness. Won’t this eventually lead to excommunication of all thinking people from the church? In that case, it is quite likely that future generations will view A. Dvorkin and his team as belonging to the same category as the darkest inquisitors of the Middle Ages. Philosophers explain that the space of Culture is built on the equal significance of science, art, and religion. Disrupting this mutually enriching triad threatens society with decline and disharmony, with a ruthless pragmatism of destructive technologies, and with ignorant religious fanaticism turning into terrorism. The gentlemen from RACIRS ought to know this!” [15]

Alexey Muravyov and Mikhail Sitnikov (article for the portal [16])

“Dvorkin’s role in anti-religious activity is made quite clear in the results of his work and on the pages of his magnum opus ‘Sectology.’ In the first case, we have countless believers offended in their religious feelings due to his sweeping negativism toward other faiths. In the second — the book itself — we find a jumble of disorganized and distorted ideas about subjects the author clearly does not understand, accompanied by a barrage of fabrications, misrepresentations, slanders, and pseudo-scholarly commentary — fictionalized to such a degree that even the works of academician Fomenko seem restrained

by comparison. As is well known, printed text is fundamentally different from spoken word — it is always more transparent. Therefore, to see Russia's 'No. 1 sectologist' without any embellishments, it's best to read this work. That's exactly what competent experts do."

M. Kuznetsov, Soviet and Russian lawyer, attorney, legal scholar, public figure, and co-author of "Essays on Russian Sectology":

"As readers of the book 'Sectology. Totalitarian Sects' are informed, Dvorkin teaches sect studies at the St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Institute and, moreover, heads the Department of Sect Studies there. This means that all students at this institution are doomed to absorb his un-Orthodox views on the matter. In addition, as noted on the book's cover, Dvorkin taught Church history at the Russian Orthodox University from 1993 to 1999. In this connection, one can only once again express regret that such important academic subjects in respected Orthodox educational institutions are and have been taught under the guidance of someone whose views are so far removed from Orthodox doctrine and worldview."

Archpriest Vladimir Fedorov in the preface to the Russian translation of the book "New Religious Movements: Practical

Introduction" by E. Barker:

"The trial initiated in May 1997 in Moscow against the aforementioned A. Dvorkin, head of the Center in the name of Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons, is quite indicative… The sharp polemics of anti-sect crusaders led various NRMs to file around 30 lawsuits against A. L. Dvorkin… On the part of Mr. Dvorkin and some representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), there were attempts to frame the case not as a private legal matter, but as a trial against Dvorkin and the ROC. This serves as an example of how the lack of legal culture among certain ROC representatives can harm the Church's reputation. If an Orthodox Christian violates traffic rules, it is not the Church that is to blame. The Church is not responsible if someone lies, tells half-truths, or conceals the truth. The Church should not condone such behavior… From a missionary point of view, it's important to note that secular scholars, politicians, and public figures whose honor and dignity are not directly harmed are unlikely to sue anyone for defamation or inaccuracies — but they may still turn away, not only from the individual 'apologist' who has resorted to extremes, but from the Church that encourages this kind of mission work. And Alexander Dvorkin isn't alone in that. All those who, under the pretext of missionary goals and Orthodox witness, incite inter-Christian hostility and animosity grew up in a time when legal consciousness was in short supply (though, admittedly, it is

hard to name a period in Russian history without such a deficit). These people fail to grasp the truly Christian call to uphold freedom of conscience. Nevertheless, we have neither the moral nor the legal right to cultivate hostility or wage denunciatory campaigns — whether against non-Orthodox groups or within Orthodoxy itself." [17]

Yekaterina Elbakyan, Doctor of Philosophy, religious studies scholar:

"Why Alexander Leonidovich does what he does — it is something you'd probably have to ask him, though I doubt he'd give you an honest answer... He believes he's defending the Russian Orthodox Church this way, but he doesn't realize that he's actually doing it far more harm than good. Through him, the Church appears utterly intolerant of diversity, completely dismissive of even the most basic civilizational values — values that, at least in theory, should be inherent to our country, which is still, according to the Constitution, a democratic state with a defined value system that includes freedom of conscience, tolerance, and so on." [18]

Kirill Tovbin, Russian researcher and publicist specializing in religious studies, human rights, and freedom of conscience:

“Dvorkin came up with a very serious concept — ‘totalitarian sect’ — and filled it with a specific meaning. But this meaning doesn’t hold up to scientific scrutiny or objective analysis… Dvorkin has consistently used this term, and more importantly, it has taken deep root within the corridors of power. To put it bluntly, Dvorkin created a kind of universal scarecrow — something that can be used to eliminate virtually any critic of the current power structure in Russia, whether they’re part of a religious movement or not. And he does it cleverly — I’d even say skillfully — talking about commercial cults, talking about Herbalife, talking about Kirby vacuum cleaners…” [19]

A clear symptom of the neurotic climate is the term ‘sect,’ aggressively promoted by neo-Orthodox sect-fighters led by A. Dvorkin. I have already criticized this term and its place in the system of contemporary Russian values. It certainly cannot withstand scientific scrutiny, failing the most basic criterion of scientific validity—objectivity. It is a subjective label that expresses the interests of a party intent on eliminating competitors vying for the Russian flock — namely, the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).

Religious consciousness — especially Christian (and post-Christian) — is marked by a rigidly determined coordinate system that produces an attitude toward anyone outside that system as demonic, diabolical, or destructive — regardless of

whether they represent another confession, or are atheists or agnostics.

But when, through state patronage, this mindset breaks out of its religious boundaries and becomes part of public morality, it drags everyone in the secular sphere into a binary dynamic of 'friends and foes,' 'us vs. them,' and 'brothers vs. enemies.' People who absorb this framework as something self-evident are unable to grow into self-sufficient, independent personalities capable of confronting challenges on their own. The habit of retreating into religious abstractions when faced with external difficulties becomes a widespread reflex.

This fosters authoritarianism, mistrust, and suspicion, affirms a binary view of social reality, and drives a preference for economic and informational isolation — features all too familiar from the Soviet past. The person shaped by such a system is weak, easily manipulated, passive-aggressive, driven by herd instincts, and underdeveloped as a personality — a perfect tool for the oligarchic-bureaucratic political machine. [20]

Igor Lysenko, a Russian publicist and journalist, wrote in his article "Mistaking Wishful Thinking for Reality, or Will Alexander Dvorkin's Prediction Come True?":

"...a person who lies reveals a lack of personal integrity, severely limiting their ability to perceive reality in a balanced and open way (to borrow the words of Catholic theologian Hans Küng). Such a person is damaged and self-centered, often intolerant and prejudiced toward anything that doesn't fit into their worldview. And as a result, they are more prone to confusing wishful thinking with reality — which is nothing more than self-deception." [21]

Sergei Ivanenko, Doctor of Philosophy and religious scholar:

"Dvorkin wanted to bend all the sects into a ram's horn... Everyone he sees, left and right, is a cultist or a totalitarian sect.

You know, our acquaintance was partly accidental, partly logical. Back then, I worked in a building that's since been demolished — it was the parliamentary center under the Supreme Soviet of Russia. The Department of Religious Education and Catechism was nearby, in the Vysoko-Petrovsky Monastery. One day, a woman who had worked in the 'Znanie' [Knowledge] Society during Soviet times called me and said they were gathering people who could lecture and knew at least something about religion. She suggested it might be useful for me to speak with a specialist who had just come

from America and was working on new religious movements and sects.

So, I went over to chat. Sure enough, I met this active guy, eyes practically on fire. And his eyes still burn bright, even 30 years later, although we haven't spoken much in recent years. He immediately told me that we didn't need any of these reference books, no need to study anything — the Americans had already written everything we needed in English — and that we had to bend all these sects into a ram's horn: ban some, heavily restrict others, and so on.

But the danger I sensed was this: people were getting fired up not to study or engage in dialogue with new or alternative religions, but to act from a position of force — pulling in law enforcement and the state." [22]

I formed a distinct impression of the personality of A. L. Dvorkin, who has become a kind of symbol of Russian anti-cultism: burning eyes, aggressive speech, unbridled demagoguery and poor knowledge of the topic under discussion. I felt I was looking at the character Khlestakov in the flesh. The two Alexanders — Khlestakov and Dvorkin — are united by their tendency toward pathological lying. It's a specific psychological condition. According to some

psychologists, pathological liars differ from ordinary ones in that they genuinely believe the falsehoods they tell."

From the essay "On the Periodization of the History of Anticultism in Post-Soviet Russia" by Sergei Ivanenko [23]

*Ivan Khlestakov is a character from Nikolai Gogol's 1836 comedy "The Government Inspector." A flamboyant and shameless liar and braggart, Khlestakov gave rise to the Russian term *"khlyestakovshchina*," defined in S.I. Ozhegov's Dictionary of the Russian Language as "brazen boastfulness."

Vladimir Ryakhovsky, attorney and co-chairman of the Slavic Legal Center:

"...in essence, the St. Irenaeus of Lyons Center, led by Dvorkin, is itself a highly destructive sect. Founded on falsehoods, it promotes hostility toward a number of law-abiding religious organizations that are officially recognized and legally operating in our country." [24]

Boris Knorre, PhD, religious scholar:

"My impression is that Alexander Leonidovich [Dvorkin] has clung to a worldview and a paradigm of belief that solidified for him back in the '90s. And for that reason, I think for him to reconsider it." [25]

Marat S. Shterin, a Doctoral student at the London School of Economics & Political Science:

"An underlying assumption of Dvorkin's paper is that all NRMs have essentially the same characteristics, and they all can be called 'totalitarian sects' and 'destructive cults.' It seems thus sufficient for the author to give a few examples from a few groups to make the general claim about dangers coming from all NRMs. Moreover, these activities are described as anti-social *because* they are associated with cults. An 'accusation-by-association' method is widely used in the paper. Following such a logic, the author was bound to enter a kind of vicious circle: cults are dangerous because their activities are dangerous; their activities are dangerous because cults are dangerous…

Dvorkin alleges that the Hare Krishna are building up their 'empire in the food industry and pharmaceutical industry.' This is simply untrue unless a dozen of kiosks, a couple of restaurants and a couple of dozens of individuals privately practising ayurvedic medicine can be called 'industrial empires'…

Several other examples of *uncritical selective usage of the media stories* suggest that Dvorkin fails to recognise the difference between the media reports on the one hand and

rigorous, systematically conducted investigations on the other. Moreover, he seems to have difficulties in *distinguishing between the mass opinion about the cults and the sources of this opinion*. First, the mass opinion about cults, to which Dvorkin refers, should be a matter of a separate and accurate study; second, this opinion cannot be regarded as evidence of their proliferation or dangers. After all, Dvorkin himself has been one of the sources of the public 'knowledge' about cults and as such he seems to be recycling his own information…

In short, the paper gives a black-and-white picture of the cult and anti-cult rivalry in Russia. It is based on a biased selection of negative assumptions, facts, rumours, allegations or incorrect information. Dvorkin's general claims are not substantiated by the evidence provided. On the other hand, he seems to have overlooked the actual problems which Russian society is faced with in its encounter with new religions." [26]

A. Panchenko, Doctor of Philology:

"By the way, since the conversation has turned to NRMs and the current religious climate in Russia, I have to express my outrage that the Expert Council on State Religious Evaluation at the Ministry of Justice is now headed by the notorious anticult activist Alexander Dvorkin — who, in my view, should be prosecuted for inciting religious hatred. This appointment

is just another example of incompetence of the current ruling elite." [27]

I. Kanterov, religious studies scholar and distinguished professor at Moscow State University:

"...Dvorkin's works 'more closely resemble pamphlets modeled after Léo Taxil and Yemelyan Yaroslavsky.' They largely consist of 'ridicule and deliberately caricatured depictions' of new religious movements, rely heavily on criminal terminology (terms like 'recruitment' and 'murder sects/cults') and offer no serious, evidence-based analysis." [28]

Alexander Brod, director of the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights:
"Alexander Dvorkin is the author of pseudoscientific works on so-called 'sectology,' which aim to unjustifiably discredit and ultimately ban a number of religious groups and movements. His insulting speeches, articles, and books have repeatedly provoked outrage from representatives of various faiths as well as from religious studies experts." [29]

Maksim Shevchenko, television host:
"We'll take every necessary step to ensure that a legitimate Expert Council on Religious Literature functions in this country. We're not seeking populism or rash decisions. We're

working toward civil peace in Russia — and that requires goodwill and meaningful action, not cheap populist gestures… Now look at the council under the Ministry of Justice and pay attention who's in charge! I'm certain that its decisions and conclusions will carry no weight among Muslims, or among any reasonable people, for that matter." [30]

Lev Simkin, professor and doctor of law:
"It's telling that despite the loud claims made by this 'sectologist' about murders and sexual abuse allegedly committed by 'sectarians,' not a single police chief across the six regions where he claimed to see a 'cult threat' could confirm any such incidents." [31]

Nikolai Mitrokhin, Russian historian and sociologist:
"The actions of these Orthodox informants and provocateurs — people like Dvorkin, Frolov, and others like them — are no longer met with irony by active members of the ROC but with total rejection." [32]

Sergey Kosenko, a Hare Krishna follower who clashed with Dvorkin:
"…My confrontation with Dvorkin happened in the pedestrian underpass between Kuznetsky Most and Lubyanka… I was carrying a stack of 20 books (copies of 'The Science of Self-Realization') with both hands, so I physically couldn't hit

anyone even if I wanted to. Dvorkin ran up and started grabbing at my arms and backpack. I stood in front of him and just looked at him, still holding the books. He started shouting insults at the author of the book 'The Science of Self-Realization', the spiritual teacher Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. I told him to stop disrespecting the teacher, because it was through Prabhupada's translations and commentaries on the scriptures that I turned my life for the better. Dvorkin then grabbed one of the books from my stack and began tearing it up. It was a hardcover, but he managed to rip it in half. I kept that torn book… He had to prove to himself that he was right. That's how fanatics usually convince themselves they are right: first they destroy a book, and then they can pick up a knife in order to kill in the name of their faith, that is, in fact, he no longer controls himself.

Dvorkin hides behind the Church. Because of his public rhetoric, uninformed people start to believe that society is split into 'us' and 'them.' Moreover, anticult crusades only aggravate religious and faith ignorance. People turn away from Orthodoxy when they hear statements of people like Dvorkin.

Professor Alexander Dvorkin isn't an Orthodox Christian. The true Orthodox Christians are St. Sergius of Radonezh or Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh. At its core, Orthodoxy follows the Christian principle: 'Love the Lord your God…and

Love your neighbor as yourself.' Aggression has nothing to do with religion. Dvorkin has a fevered mind, so he lashes out at everyone." [33]

Willy Fautré, human rights advocate (director of HRWF, Belgium)
"Every year, there's an annual meeting in Warsaw in September-October. I've been in Warsaw for the last 20 years… Dvorkin was there several years ago. It was the first time I was in physical contact with him. That guy is absolutely crazy. He was running around [all around] the room where there was that high-level meeting, taking pictures of those who were criticizing a number of countries like Russia, for example, but also defending some religious minorities.

And I had a document at that time in which I was accusing him. And didn't know before that he would be present at the conference. And I put that on the table, I just placed my documents on the table as many other human rights organizations. And some of these, Dvorking was taking all my papers and putting them in the paper basket…" [34]

Gleb Yakunin, Soviet and Russian religious, civil, and political public figure, dissident, and member of the Moscow Helsinki Group:
"The anticult movement, which in itself resembles a peculiar

and well-organized cult, is tirelessly collecting smears on those it blacklists. It refuses to see anything positive in new religious communities, and it conveniently overlooks the fact that traditional religions often engage in the exact same behavior ."

"On the Periodization of the History of Anticultism in Post-Soviet Russia," Sergey Ivanenko, [35]

Natalia Babasyan, journalist:

"Alexander Dvorkin, who is closely connected with Western anticult leaders, spearheaded the Russian 'crusade' against so-called 'cults.' With his help, resentful parents organized themselves into the Committee for the Salvation of Youth. Dvorkin himself founded and headed the Center for Religious Studies in the Name of Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons, which promotes anticult literature and hosts seminars on combating 'cults.' However, due to Mr. Dvorkin's habit of interpreting any criticism of him as an attack on the ROC, the goodwill towards him within the Moscow Patriarchate has noticeably diminished over time. Furthermore, the fact that he accumulated funds which Western anticultists invested in the 'holy fight' also caused resentment among competitors within Orthodox circles. Nevertheless, the role of Dvorkin and his 'educational activities' in destroying the early sprouts of religious tolerance in Russia is truly enormous. His book on 'sectology' has even

been recommended by the Prosecutor General's Office as a guideline for regional prosecutors." [36]

Lev Levinson, Russian human rights advocate, journalist, and legal expert:
"...parents of 'victims of totalitarian sects' are held in high esteem, having created — with help from the media — a legend of tens of thousands of grief-stricken Russian families. In reality, there are no more such families than there are people harmed by Orthodoxy itself. This is despite the fact that the demonization of 'cults' by informators like Dvorkin only heightens fear among relatives, who are typically alarmed by nothing more than the fact that a loved one has been 'recruited' into some terrifying 'cult.' Encouraged by anticult activists, the parents of 'victims' paint lurid pictures: *'Pseudo-religious organizations such as Aum Shinrikyo, the Krishna Consciousness, Vissarion's followers, and others are nothing but mass-production factories of mentally ill people, set up like concentration camps, where victims are held 'voluntarily' in a state of total psychological dependence on the cult (its leader, worldview system, and discipline).*"

Source: Article "Notes on Faith and Madness*"* [37]

Yevgeny Borisovich Rashkovsky, Doctor of Historical Sciences:
"When a group of officials — appointed, essentially, by no one

knows who — arbitrarily decides what a person should believe, how they should believe it, and how they're permitted to share those beliefs with others, such a system becomes, in my view, a deliberate or inadvertent assault not only on the individual and their faith, but on society and the state as well. For the latter are formed and evolve through human interaction — and they can only remain alive through uncoerced communication among people. Otherwise, what follows is stagnation, decay, and chaos. Another cycle of terror and civil strife." [38]

Statement by Irina Glushkova, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Indian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences:
"A few days ago (quite by chance), I came across an article titled *'The Hare Krishnas as They Are'* on many websites affiliated with various Orthodox organizations and foundations. On some of these sites, the article, which I do not agree with, is attributed to me. On others, it is preceded by an epigraph quoting a statement from my 1996 piece in 'Nezavisimaya Gazeta,' made during a debate on a specific issue. However, since the posted article, which is clearly anti-Krishna in tone, is unsigned, but my name is mentioned, it gives the impression that I am its author. The person who most frequently resorts to referencing my name and that same quote (while ignoring the 200 other academic works I've published) is Alexander Dvorkin." [39]

Stanislav Panin, religious studies scholar, Ph.D: "Of course, Dvorkin is a figure who, by now, has completely discredited himself in many respects. So much so that it's increasingly common to hear criticism of Dvorkin even from those who call themselves cult experts. They are actively distancing themselves from him. Because the man is so odious, so notorious for distorting facts and for his excessive emotionality… that even cult experts now want to cut ties with him in order to cultivate a more favorable image for themselves." [40]

Lyudmyla Filipovych, professor, vice president of the Ukrainian Association of Religious Scholars:
"Due to his extravagance and hyper-charisma — let's admit it — Dvorkin has astonished us for years with his biting and, at the same time, demeaning characterizations of other teachings… But more than anything, what's unacceptable is his manner. It always begs a question: where is your Christian piety? Where is your humility? Where is your love for your neighbor? I mean, he hates the sin of dissent so much that he transfers that hatred onto those who hold different views — onto the person. But we know perfectly well that Christianity, at its core, does not permit condemning a person, even a sinful one. Only the sin may be condemned. Even today, as religious fundamentalism rises across the board and interfaith dialogue continues to erode, Dvorkin's extremist stance — and the

tactics he has chosen — remain, in my view, entirely unacceptable. I believe his rhetoric can be classified as defamation — the spreading of damaging claims that do not correspond to reality." [41]

Maria Akhmetova, Ph.D. in Philology:
"Of course, I'm not suggesting that leaders or adherents of NRMs are incapable of committing crimes or suffering from mental illness. But promoting the stereotypes listed above as the defining traits of any NRM leads to the formation of a negative image of 'cults' or 'cultists' as such — and ultimately to intolerance toward them. (For more on religious xenophobia, see, for example: [Verkhovsky et al. 1998: 168–189].)

So what can we, as researchers, do in this situation? We can engage in public discourse and present our perspectives. Naturally, we must recognize that for a number of reasons we can't compete in popularity with figures in the anticult movement, who benefit from support from both the state and the Church. (Just compare the circulation of the average humanities publication to that of Aleksandr Dvorkin's 'Sectology' [Dvorkin 2000], which claims to be 'scientific' and is sold in bookstores as well as on church shelves.)

Still, we are capable of providing accurate, unbiased information about NRMs — particularly in reference and

encyclopedic publications, which tend to have a broader readership than specialized academic literature in the humanities.

And the problem is both real and pressing. Many reference works are overtly biased against NRMs. They've been published as part of the Russian Orthodox Church's missionary efforts, and so their explicit goal is to prove the heretical nature of these teachings compared to Orthodoxy, as well as their supposed harm to individuals and society. The exposing framing of NRMs in such publications is reminiscent of the way 'religious fanatics' and 'obscurantist clergy' were portrayed in Soviet-era atheist literature." [42]

Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the SOVA research center:
"Dvorkin as a public activist… well, those are just his views. To me, they don't seem very clear. They're not really grounded in any kind of conceptual framework. Let's put it this way: they're strictly motivated by confessional reasoning — whether a religion is right or wrong. He somehow draws that distinction, and that's his religious viewpoint. He has the right to hold that view, and he actively promotes it, but unfortunately, he often spreads false information while usually citing foreign sources. As a result, it's difficult to fact-check. If he didn't say all kinds of nonsense about real organizations, everything would be fine… It's weird, of course, that someone like him was

appointed to a position of responsibility linked to the ministry. I think the minister has probably regretted that decision ten times over by now, but nevertheless, he's still in that position." [43]

Sergey Filatov, sociologist and religious studies scholar (in 2009, he didn't mince words):
"The appointment of Alexander Dvorkin is, in my view, an act of either arrogance or madness — on the part of both the authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church, which surely must have blessed the elevation of its patriarchal cult expert. Dvorkin is a symbolic figure. For years, he has relentlessly vilified religious minorities, accusing — or at least suspecting — them of the most outrageous crimes, while urging authorities to crack down on religious freedom. Until now, he operated as the ROC's go-to cult expert. The hate campaign he's fueled hasn't helped the Church; in my opinion, it has tarnished its reputation. But at least back then, he was speaking for a public organization, not the state. Now the state itself inherits responsibility for the slander and hate he spreads. Why would it want that? It's like the saying: 'The woman's life was easy until she made it busy.'" [44]

Mikhail Zherebyatev, religious studies scholar, columnist, PhD:
"When it comes to forcibly suppressing religious diversity, no ideology proves more convenient than anticultism. The only

ones who truly grasp its cost are secular scholars of religion — but who's listening to them? Meanwhile, anticultist Alexander Dvorkin is now the 'king of the television screen' and, in that capacity, an undeniable public opinion leader. The post-Soviet Russian government's mediacratic priorities are well known. In short, it all came together — and they conveniently found someone who, in a time of crisis, could name the next 'enemy.' That's a PR win in itself!

How long will anticultism last as the *de facto* ideology of Russia's state religious policy — days, weeks, months? Most likely, the presidential administration will attempt to return to a 'nonintervention' policy. From the outset, this Orthodox cultist-led campaign to control the diversity of religious life has been mired in scandal and backroom maneuvering. It's unlikely that 'Staraya Ploshchad' [the seat of the presidential administration] will call on the academics for help this time — there's no need when it can be handled quietly behind closed doors. Whether or not the Russian government will succeed in restoring the nonintervention policy is another question altogether.

But one thing can be said with absolute certainty right now: the very act of the Ministry of Justice 'legalizing' anticultism and Orthodox sectology — nearly elevating it to the status of 'an academic discipline' — by granting anticultist and

'sectologist' Alexander Dvorkin the powers of chief religious studies expert (even for an hour!) will be exploited, as they say, to the fullest by both confessional hardliners and shallow-minded bureaucrats.

Given that mass Orthodox education 'on the ground' — particularly for school teachers, parents, students, and low-level officials—today boils down to stories about the dangers that various 'sects' and 'cults' pose to naïve adherents of 'traditional' religiosity, it's not hard to see that the rise of the 'Anticultist of All Rus' will drive up demand for more 'Orthodox sectologists.' That is, more people like Dvorkin!" [45]

Yury Savenko, president of the Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia:
"...the now-common term 'totalitarian sects' is itself 'the product of a totalitarian mindset' — one that assumes interest in another faith stems from some kind of 'secret evil technology' rather than a natural process." [46]

Roman Lunkin, religious scholar, president of the Guild of Experts on Religion and Law, sociologist of religion, columnist, and journalist:
"Authorities in the Russian Far East are aware of the risks of interfaith conflict. That's why, for example, anticultist Alexander Dvorkin — chair of the Expert Council on State

Religious Evaluation under the Russian Ministry of Justice — is not allowed into Vladivostok due to his lectures that insult various faiths and denominations. Instead, Dvorkin travels to smaller towns. In the city of Spassk, Primorsky Krai, following one of his talks, all the windows in Protestant prayer houses were smashed — and, as expected, the perpetrators were never found." [47]

Anatoly Pchelintsev, attorney, professor, Doctor of Law:
"What we're seeing today is a trend where everyone is suddenly labeled a 'sectarian.' Dvorkin even defines a group of commercial sects: those involved in so-called multi-level marketing — he considers them sectarians too. Healing organizations, folk healers — it's all sectarianism to him. In my view, by the very criteria Dvorkin uses to define sects, his own group fits the mold of a classic sect — specifically, a totalitarian one. And I have no hesitation in saying it's a quasi-Orthodox sect." [48]

Inna Zagrebina, lawyer and research fellow at the Institute of Religion and Law, in her article "Russia on the Brink of a 'Sectology War'":
"The crusade against so-called 'sects' — a label applied to all non-Orthodox religious organizations — has become a favorite topic among certain factions of the quasi-Orthodox public. In their 'religious war,' the fighters against 'sects' do not hesitate

to engage in deliberate, planned falsification of materials, distortion of facts, and the mass dissemination of xenophobia and religious intolerance.

As part of this ideological 'war,' a so-called academic conference titled 'Cults and Human Rights' is scheduled to take place on May 15–16 in St. Petersburg. The event is being organized by the country's self-proclaimed 'chief cult expert,' Mr. Dvorkin, who lacks the proper education or any academic credentials recognized by Russia's Higher Attestation Commission. Yet what he does have are 'achievements' such as establishing clone organizations whose main mission is to wage war on dissenters… The main accomplishment of the 'chief cult expert' appears to be subversive activity…

Judging by the conference's title, participants will likely deliberate on whether individuals even have the right to join sects and cults — or whether the threat is so grave that the state must intervene to prevent the 'spiritual death' of its Orthodox-by-birth citizens.

Similar conferences have been held across Russia before. They are typically followed by the publication of fear mongering booklets, which rely heavily on selectively chosen, distorted, and fabricated stories; unproven assertions; and narratives rejected by modern science.

For instance:
'Just remember the horrifying events in Yaroslavl, Yakutia, and Brazil, where cult members were driven to brutal suicides. In Yaroslavl, for example, a female doctor killed herself shortly after joining a sect — she came home, poured kerosene into a basin, stepped in barefoot, and dropped a lit match into the flammable liquid. In Yakutia, sect members were convicted of torturing a ten-year-old boy who died from his injuries. And there are many such horrific tales around the world. Organizations practicing neo-Pentecostalism pose a serious social threat.' The most striking thing is that *none* of these claims are supported by court rulings.

These are exactly the methods used by Dvorkin's so-called 'scholars' when preparing their 'scientific' reports. By spreading rumors and fabrications, they create a negative image of various religious communities, attribute hostility to them, and help foster an atmosphere of religious intolerance in the regions…

With the recent announcement of the anticult conference jointly hosted by FECRIS and Russia's Ministry of Justice, many experts now say it has become glaringly obvious why so many members of the Ministry's advisory council are affiliated with Dvorkin's quasi-Orthodox sect — because Minister Konovalov himself is an ideological ally. Trying to turn "Dvorkin-style

sectology" — an ideology that fuels hatred between religions — into official state religious policy is a clear provocation. It is an attempt to steer Russia toward a 'Balkan scenario' — toward national collapse." [49]

V. Filkina, PhD in Sociology:
"...Dvorkin's key conceptual terms — 'totalitarianism' and 'destructiveness' — are not accepted in the academic world, 'as they function more as stigmatizing labels with strong negative connotations, essentially serving as a kind of 'social weapon." Despite the fact that Dvorkin's books and articles largely rely on 'unreliable sources,' such as 'tabloid stories, online posts, and personal opinions,' his terminology is frequently adopted by state authorities." [50]

Bertil Persson, from the book "The Fight Against Sects":
"Dvorkin is frequently criticized for his harsh rhetoric and proposals targeting new religious movements. In an interview with the national TV channel NTV, he likened Jehovah's Witnesses to drug dealers and called them slaves. Such comparisons closely resemble infamous slander tactics of Nazi ideology."

Oleg Lurie, journalist and blogger:
"Life is all about struggle. And if there's no enemy, one gets invented. That's exactly how it works for those who care more

about the spectacle of fighting than any real victory — especially when no real enemy actually exists. I'm referring to the man who came to Russia from the United States on a grand mission to eliminate terrifying sects which, according to him, are everywhere in the Russian Federation. Wherever he looks, he sees a sect. So, under orders from Higher Powers, he's here to purge them. A sort of spiritual 'cleaner'…

And if clearly dubious 'experts' like Alexander Dvorkin are heading expert councils at top government ministries, it's no surprise that there are serious technical flaws in the operation of the executive branch. Poor experts produce poor outcomes."
51

Anatoly Krasikov, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor:
"Of course, any religious organization, whether marginal or mainstream, may harbor factions that preach intolerance or lean toward extremism. These exist in Russia as well, not only among certain new religious movements like Aum Shinrikyo, but also among followers of respected faiths such as Orthodoxy and Islam. Among them are, on one hand, the incredibly loud and aggressive 'defenders of Orthodoxy' (typified by the scandal-prone head of the cult studies department at the Russian Orthodox Church's St. Tikhon's Orthodox University, Alexander Dvorkin, as well as the leaders of the 'Orthodoxy or Death' movement) and on the other hand,

Muslim leaders who, contrary to their sacred texts, engage in or promote terrorism (with Shamil Basayev being the undisputed leader in this regard)." [52]

International Criticism

On May 1, 2009, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (www.uscirf.gov) submitted a report to President Barack Obama, the U.S. Congress, and the public on issues concerning religious freedom in several countries around the world, including Russia. The Commission expressed concern over the newly established body within the Russian Ministry of Justice — the Expert Religious Studies Council — and specifically over the figure of the Council's chairman, Alexander Dvorkin. [53]

In Conclusion

This list could go on endlessly — the internet remembers everything.

Those who might have stood up to Dvorkin's sect — the victims of anticult stigmatization, the so-called "sectarians," "cultists," and members of the academic community — were either silenced or ignored. The former, targeted by RACIRS, lost in court, faced criminal prosecution, and were deprived of the opportunity to speak out or defend themselves. The latter, the academic community, though it tried to voice criticism and issue warnings, ultimately went unheard. A full-scale suppression of religions began. Dvorkin's totalitarian sect simply pushed them to the margins.

To be continued.

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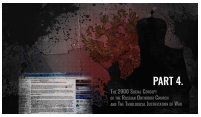

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